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**WELCOME ADDRESS BY PROF K SATKU  
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AT THE REDI REGIONAL MEETING ON INTERNATIONAL  
LABORATORY BIOSAFETY & BIOSECURITY  
7<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2005, 9am  
MINISTRY OF HEALTH AUDITORIUM**

Distinguished Guests and Speakers,

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1 Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to all our guests. I would also like to acknowledge the support given by the World Health Organisation. WHO has extended to us an excellent group of distinguished speakers who will share with us the latest in biosafety and biosecurity standards for the laboratory environment. I am also very happy to see that the region is well represented. We have with us leaders in biosafety and biosecurity from our neighbouring countries some of whom will be addressing us at this meeting. This is an affirmation that in this region we are all committed to the challenge of making our laboratories a safer place.

2 We are witnessing a new wave of scientific advancement across Asia. At the forefront of this new wave are significant breakthroughs like gene therapy, stem cell research and the creation of transgenic plants and animals in life sciences and biotechnology.

3 The race to make new discoveries in this research arena is spurred on by the possibility of improving the quality of life in general and by the immense economic rewards. With this prospect many biomedical industries engaged in research in micro-organisms and toxins are sprouting in many parts of our region. These micro-organisms have the potential to cause through accidental exposure new or established diseases or to be used in bioterrorism. These public health risks threaten to negate the benefits of these new industries.

4 In 2001, the potential for bioterrorism was made apparent when anthrax-tainted letters killed 5 people and traumatized millions in the United States of America. We experienced first hand the fear of anthrax when suspicious letters and packages containing white

powder sparked emergency alerts across Asia. Thankfully, none of these contained anthrax.

5 We were made acutely aware of how much the tiniest of microbes can impact our way of life a couple of years later. SARS brought fear into the hearts of our people and also affected the livelihoods of many when businesses and the economy were hit. When the outbreak was finally contained, there was still a lot of concern that SARS would return from wherever it was hiding in nature.

6 As it turned out, the next 3 SARS outbreaks came from lapses in laboratory practices, including one in Singapore. It was fortunate that in all these cases, control measures were swiftly and decisively imposed, thus preventing any of these events from becoming full-blown SARS outbreaks with major public health implications.

7 Asia continues to be ravaged by outbreaks of potentially lethal infections. The most immediate experience is the H5N1 Avian Influenza in poultry. With the emergence of human Avian Influenza

cases, the chances of exposure to such infectious agents among lab workers are also consequently higher.

8 Our experience with SARS showed that there are still deadly infections out there. The three laboratory breaches involving SARS have reinforced that our laboratories, as reservoirs for these microbes, are potential sources of outbreaks and there can be lapses in biosafety. We have also learnt that in today's global economy infections cannot be restrained by geographical borders.

9 There is therefore an urgent need for us to work together to ensure that biosafety and biosecurity measures are in place to ensure proper handling of all highly infectious pathogens. This is especially critical in the lab environment as both endemic pathogens as well as those which do not naturally exist in our region but are brought into the labs for research and development. Escape of such pathogens into the environment, in particular the latter group, may start new epidemics and become a public health concern. It will, therefore, be of mutual benefit if we can work together with WHO to promote the concepts of laboratory biosafety and biosecurity in the region.

10 In Singapore the National Biosafety Committee was appointed to study the gaps in biosafety and make proposals to enhance biosafety. After our experience with the lab-related SARS infection, no efforts were spared to hasten the formulation of a legislative biosafety framework based on the Committee's recommendations.

11 I am pleased to share that my Ministry will be conducting a round of consultation with the public and the relevant industries on the Biological Agents and Toxins Bill. This is to ensure that we have the full support of our rapidly growing biomedical and biotechnology industry. It is only when every individual involved in lab work adheres to biosafety practices and also internalizes its principles that we would have secured our goals.

12 My colleague, Mr Koh Peng Keng will elaborate on this process tomorrow when he speaks on Singapore's perspectives on biosafety and biosecurity.

13 It is also most opportune that the World Health Organisation, as the leader in public health, has updated the WHO Biosafety Manual. The manual now not only provides practical guidance on biosafety techniques for use in the laboratories at all levels, but also covers important issues like risk assessment and safe use of recombinant DNA technology and provides guidance on commissioning and certification of laboratories.

14 I note that laboratory biosecurity concepts and an updated version of regulations pertaining to the transport of infectious substances are also introduced in this latest edition. This would, indeed, provide the much needed help and guidance to countries developing technology in life sciences.

15 This meeting demonstrates our commitment to adhering to the highest standards of biosafety and biosecurity. I am also certain that this meeting will be the first of many which will draw people from the region together to enhance our biosafety capabilities. I trust that all of you will have an enriching experience at this meeting and learn many valuable lessons from presentations of our distinguished speakers.

I would also like to wish our overseas participants a very pleasant stay in Singapore.

16 It is now my pleasure to declare the REDI regional meeting on International Biosafety and Biosecurity open. Thank you!